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Number of state workers opting for retirement soars

The exodus, prompted in part by the reduction in health-care benefits due to go into effect Wednesday, leaves some departments scrambling for staff.

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PROVIDENCE — All around Rhode Island, retirement parties have emerged as the social event of the season.

State offices from Providence to Cranston are lined with invites promising cocktails, dinner, or just coffee honoring another, and another, departing colleague.

As the state closes in on tomorrow's deadline after which new retirees will

have to pay more — in some cases double — for their health insurance, hundreds of employees across state government have retired. Many of those say they made the difficult decision to leave years before they might otherwise to avoid the increases.

Thus far in 2008, 1,259 of the state's roughly 14,000 employees have announced their departures, close to four times the number that did so between January and September of last year, ac-

cording to the state treasurer's office, which oversees the retirement board.

Some in state government predict that number could substantially increase by tomorrow's deadline.

The exodus prompts questions about what happens to the departments and units left with gaping holes in their staffs.

Unlike other years when the governor has simply replaced those who have retired, this year the administration says it is "not certain" how many of those jobs it can refill given the leftover \$33.6-million state deficit and the national financial crisis.

Employees across state departments say exhaustion, low moral and panic is setting in.

At the Department of Children, Youth and Families, there are fewer child-support technicians to supervise court-ordered visits. Technician Paul Levesque said the shortage leaves him no choice but to pull children out of school to fulfill all of the court orders.

The state Department of Environmental Management has lost 23 percent of its work force, with most retirees coming from the top management ranks whose years of experience Director W. Michael Sullivan said he de-

pends on. The vast majority have also come out of the parks and recreation department, where efforts most affect the public.

Over at the Education Department, five of the seven academic specialists — the staffers responsible for helping improve academic instruction throughout

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the state in areas such as math and reading — have left. "The specialists have the closest relationships with the districts because they're the ones who spend a lot of time out there," said RIDE spokesman Elliot Krieger. "They're the ones in the field."

The Department of Motor Vehicles, the University of Rhode Island, the Health Department and the Rhode Island Veterans Home have also been hit hard, losing dozens of key employees and years upon years of institutional knowledge.

Their officials say they're coping temporarily by adding shifts and shuffling duties, but have no idea how they'll manage in the long term if the state doesn't replace the retirees.

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The Carcieri administration says it is working on a plan to monitor offices and restructure certain divisions to make better use of remaining resources. The governor is meeting with department heads this week to assess critical gaps and begin charting a course. The state has also enlisted Textron and Johnson & Wales University to educate senior staff about the business model known as Six Sigma, which helps identify priorities and how to do more with less.

Initially, Carcieri said he planned to fill all but about 400 vacancies. But with the state and national economic situation getting ever bleaker, and the administration deadlocked in a la-

bor contract dispute with the largest public employees union, he has since backed off that promise.

"Right now my position is we're not backfilling anything until we see how it all works out" with the final retirement numbers, Carcieri told reporters last week.

Speaking on a radio talk show, Carcieri posed another possibility: pairing the 8.5 percent of Rhode Islanders who are unemployed (and did not just retire from the state) with the newly vacated jobs. "Some departments don't have an administrative assistant. They're concerned about having people to answer the phones. I say rather than going out to temp agencies, why don't we see if we can match up people who are looking for work with some short-term temporary needs," the governor said.

Many wonder about the financial wisdom of plugging staffing holes through extra shifts.

"Look at the overtime they're spending," said Cathy Paquette, a welfare eligibility technician and president of Local 2882, a Department of Human Services union. "We're on 8 and 10 hours of overtime [per employee per week] in some offices. Don't get me wrong, people like overtime, but after awhile you get burned out and it's got to be costing the state thousands and thousands of dollars."

She and others say they also fear "a second wave" of retirements this fall and winter, prompted by the strain that comes when fewer employees try to keep their departments

afloat. That prospect could push the state to the brink, Paquette predicted.

In a last-minute attempt to block the governor from imposing benefit changes, the state's largest public employees union, Council 94, has taken the administration to court, saying it tried to "force" long-term employees to leave. But with both sides claiming victory after a hearing Friday, the outcome remains unclear and the parties are due back in Providence Superior Court this morning.

Until recently, Rhode Island was one of 11 states that paid 100 percent of medical benefits for most employees who retire with the required years of service before age 65, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

But this spring, the Rhode Island legislature voted to scale back retiree benefits to try and staunch a growing budget deficit and bring the plans more in line with private industry.

Workers who retire after tomorrow will not only pay more for their medical coverage, they must wait until age 59 to qualify. Currently, there is no age requirement if the years of service have been completed.

The overall savings from the early retirements will not be known for at least several more weeks, when the state finalizes the numbers of people who opted to walk away and recalibrates what it has left.

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